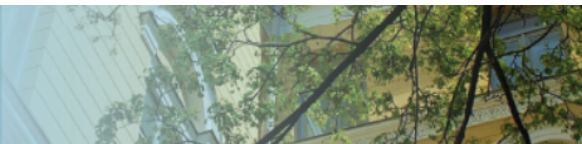


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## **A Postdramatic Psychoanalytical Dramaturgy.**

Romeo Castellucci was the invited curator at the 2008 Avignon theatre festival. The first encounter with his work may easily be experienced as strange, and sometimes probably as shocking. Even the fundamental question whether it should be classified as theatre or not could be asked. In many of his performances the actors do not speak a single word. And when they speak, their words are often of no more importance than the overwhelming images and soundscapes. What Castellucci creates can no longer be described as classical dramatic theatre. These performances no longer follow the basic principles of the Greek tragedy which Aristotle formulated in his *Poetics*.

In the dramatic theatre, for example in *Hamlet*, the story is the most central part of the performance. *Hamlet* is created in a such a way that the spectator can follow the story and identify himself with the hero. The recognisability of plot and characters are important aspects of a classical dramatic play. Castellucci's work on the contrary is an example of what Hans-Thies Lehmann defines as postdramatic theatre. The postdramatic theatre distinguishes itself in its relation to the text. The text is no longer the basic of the performance. Plot and text become peripheral elements next to sound, body and image. To quote Lehmann:

the text is subject to the same laws and dislocations as the visual, audible, gestic and architectonic theatrical signs....The 'principles of narration and figuration' and the order of a 'fable' (story) are disappearing in the contemporary 'no longer dramatic theatre text'. An 'autonomization of language' develops. ...Language appears not as the speech of characters ... but as an autonomous theatricality.<sup>12</sup>

This postdramatic theatre requires not only another way of creating but also another way of looking and analysing. It is in this context that we want to re-evaluate the relation between theatre and psychoanalytical theory. This relation hasn't always been positive. In the past the psychoanalytical theory has often been used, misused and abused to defend a psychologised approach of role and character. Inspired by the analytical theory, some actors tried to play not only the conscious behaviour of their character but also the explication of the unconscious drives that were the causes of their behaviour. This approach is the reason why some theatre makers still don't appreciate the psychoanalytical discourse as a basic discourse for dramaturgy.

When we read the texts of Freud and Lacan about theatre, it is most striking that these psychoanalytical authors do not lay emphasis on a story that can easily be repeated.

When they write about theatre, their first goal is to analyse the structure of the conflict on which the plot is written. This analysis of structure, this searching for the driving force, the insoluble conflict of the hero, is what is present in their theory and not so much the explanation of the story. Both also emphasize the identification process that is inherent in a theatre experience. The identification of the spectator with one of the

main roles is the most important process, and is – according to Freud and Lacan - necessary for the spectator to recognize the underlying structure.

Looking at the characteristics of the postdramatic play, we could say that, at first sight this theatre can not benefit from a psychoanalytical approach. Still, if we stress the underlying structure of the performance which Freud and Lacan reveal in their theory and the underlying structure of the postdramatic performance of Castellucci's work, it is possible to come to an interesting analysis and to say more about these performances and the experience of the spectators.

### **1. Psychoanalysis, Theatre and Identification**

In his text on theatre *Psychopathic Characters on the Stage* Freud analyses the relation between the spectator and the performance or the hero. Based on Aristotle's theory, theatre has to influence the spectator by causing fear, compassion and a purification of the affects, or in other words it should end up in catharsis. Freud translates this to his theory and broadens out the goal of theatre as an unlocking of the sources of desire and enjoyment of our inner life. Unlike a lot of applications of the psychoanalytical theory on theatre, Freud does not use his theory only to analyse the story and the behaviour of the characters. He wants to reveal the basic structure of a tragedy and the relation of the spectator to the tragedy.

Basing himself on *Hamlet* he elaborates several aspects of a good tragedy or of what he calls the psychopathological drama. He asks himself what makes a spectator identify himself with the hero. First of all the tragedy has to be fiction. What happens on stage is not real. This is important to the spectator for it allows him to get lost in a

play without the danger of being hurt. Secondly, in the beginning of the play the hero has to represent a good image. For example Hamlet's strange behaviour only becomes clear after a while. In the first scenes he is the king's son who wants to find out the truth about his father's death. He acts as a hero and the audience can see the hero they would like to be. This is a good start for an identification process. Thirdly, the most important aspect of a tragedy or a psychopathological drama is –according to Freud - the presence of a conflict between a conscious and an unconscious drive, a conflict that is the source of the hero's suffering. This aspect makes the good tragedies different from other plays– which Freud calls psychological dramas and which stage a conflict between two conscious drives.

Freud underlines that in a psychopathological drama the conflict - the repressed drives or impulses – must not be staged explicitly. The conflict has to be recognizable but must not be named. A tragedy has to confront the public with the tragic aspect of every human being. But when this tragic aspect or the basic human conflict – a conflict of drives, a conflict of life and death - is staged too explicitly, the spectator will not urge himself to being confronted with this.

When the spectator identifies himself with the heroes on the scene he experiences emotions that he does not normally allow himself. This results not only in a purifying effect but also confronts the spectator with his own being. He is, like the hero, also marked by a conflict between the conscious and unconscious drives. This conflict is the cause of his suffering. It makes him into who he is, a neurotic being. For Freud this is the goal of theatre: it has to confront the public with their being by staging the basic conflict of every human being in its most extreme form, as a conflict between

life and death. Freud's analysis stresses the conflict between the repressed drives and impulses, and the consciousness. These emotions/affects/drives that the spectator does not want to recognise in his daily life are staged in a tragedy in all their beauty.

## **2. A Postdramatic Hero: a Psychoanalytical Approach**

Castellucci has created a lot of tragedies. His company Societas Raffaello Sanzio worked for example from 2002 until 2004 on the *Tragedia Endogenidia*, a tragedy that consists of eleven performances. With the term *Tragedia* Castellucci refers to the contemporary tragedy which always involves the death of a hero. The hero is marked by a continuous conflict between life and death. Life and death are involved in an inseparable relation, that stands for the tragedy of mankind.

Castellucci's definition of a tragedy and a hero is not so different from for example Hamlet. But the heroes he stages are not comparable. For a spectator it is very difficult to recognize the hero on the stage. The spectator can not identify himself with the characters – or should we call them non-attractive creatures – on the scene. In a way he feels revolted by them. And therefore the relation between them and the spectator can not be compared to the relation between for example Hamlet and the spectator. But what does the spectator look at?

The core of Castellucci's performances is without doubt the 'aesthetisizing', the beauty of the sometimes shocking images. Castellucci started his career as a visual artist and this training is of great influence in his theatre work. But what does this accent on the aesthetics of the images mean for the performance and the perception of

it? Is Castellucci more than a image-maker? What does he show us through his performances?

When we look at Castellucci's performances from Freud's perspective, we can ask ourselves whether Castellucci is staging an aesthetic version of the discordant drives? Is Castellucci making psychopathological theatre? But what about the characters? They do not represent recognizable or classical heroes. Also the absence of a 'normal' story is very striking. The spectator does not know what is happening on the scene. He can not translate the images into a plot. In this sense Castellucci's tragedies differ from the psychopathological drama. It is as if Castellucci has removed nearly every relationship with the consciousness in the staged tragedy. We can ask ourselves: can he still call it a tragedy when the conflict of the hero between the consciousness and the unconscious has nearly disappeared? Is there still a tragedy when he stages only repressed drives?

Here I want to refer to Jacques Lacan's theory of the subject. Like Freud he points at the presence of a structural conflict that constitutes the subject. This irreconcilable conflict, which he names the castration, determines every subject and his relation to the Other (big O). In other words, the genesis of the subject is not the completion of the subject but the installation of a lack , a shortage, that can never be filled up. Lacan stresses the fact that this castration is a symbolic one. The subject only exists by his registration, his subscription in the symbolic order or language. To maintain himself in this order he has to represent himself as a signifier by which he will always be castrated from his 'self'. This break, which is the cause of the lack, is the ground on which the subject constitutes himself. This lack is the cause of an unsatisfying desire

that marks every subject. This unsatisfying desire represents the insoluble conflict that every subject is. The subject will always desire to resolve the conflict, but the resolution of it would mean the destruction, the death of the subject. Therefore Lacan speaks about the ‘drama of desire’. But what can this subject theory say about theatre and moreover about the relation between the spectator and the tragedy?

In Seminar VI *Le désir et son interprétation* where Lacan makes a very profound analysis of Hamlet, he describes Hamlet as a tragedy of desire. In Seminar X *L’angoisse* he elaborates further on the analysis of the play and underlines two important scenes: the mouse-trap and the burial scene of Ophelia, which he connects with two different identifications of the spectator with the hero during the play. In the mouse-trap scene Hamlet orders a group of travelling actors to copy the murder scene of his father. He thus wants to unmask king Claudius as the murderer of his father.

Lacan here points to something interesting. The murderer in Hamlet’s performance is not the king’s brother but his nephew. From this Lacan concludes that Hamlet here stages the crime he wants to commit himself but is not able to carry out himself.

“What Hamlet has the players represent on the scene, is -all considered- in fact himself committing the crime involved”(own translation).<sup>3</sup> The mouse-trap is Hamlet’s identification with his mirror image, with his ideal, namely: killing the father to have the mother for himself. In other words the mouse-trap is Hamlet’s first phase of the Oedipus complex or the first imaginary identification..

Lacan connects the burial scene of Ophelia with the second phase of the Oedipus complex or the second imaginary identification. In the burial scene Hamlet recognizes

his object of desire through his identification with the object of desire of Laërtes, namely Ophelia. In the mourning of Laërtes for his sister, Hamlet recognizes his desire, a desire for an unattainable object. This scene stages the structure of the subject and its complex relation with the object of desire. The subject does not identify himself with the object of desire itself, that is impossible. The object of desire is always veiled. It can only be revealed in a phantasmic scenery around the object. It is after this double imaginary identification, first with his ideal ego, a hero who dares kill the father/the king, second with the impossible object of desire, Ophelia, that Hamlet is able to fight, to conquer his place.

When Lacan talks about theatre it is always in the capacity of theatre to represent the subject/the world. Theatre has to show how the subject/the world is structured. Theatre shows the presence of a non-visible object of desire. It shows that the object of desire precedes every representation, every performance. To experience this, the spectator – like Hamlet – has to go through the two identifications. The first identification with the hero or the spectator's ideal ego, gives an entrance to see and to empathize with the performance. In a lot of theatre performances and movies the identification process only consists of this first identification. Only in those performances where the ideal image of the hero is 'de-centered', is the spectator confronted with the lack in this ideal image. Only in those performances, during the play, does the spectator see a hero who searches for a solution of his conflict, who wants to fill up the lack, but does not succeed in his attempts. When the spectator identifies himself with the desire of the hero, he is confronted with his own structure of desire which is an insoluble one. Following Aristotle, Lacan names this second identification a moment of catharsis.



### **3. Postdramatic Theatre and Psychoanalysis**

What does an application of Freud's and moreover Lacan's theory tell us about the postdramatic theatre of Castellucci? What about theatre where neither a story, nor elaborated characters are there to identify with? Is it possible to represent the world in a postdramatic aesthetic and to confront the spectators with their own 'being human', with their own insoluble desire?

In Castellucci's performances it is very difficult to get an entrance (first imaginary identification) in the performance. It is nearly impossible for the spectator to identify himself with an ideal image. The images that Castellucci stages are shattered and keep transforming all the time. The performances are like a mirror that is smashed. Here and there you can recognize a glimpse of something you know, you are. But Castellucci never offers a clear image, a clear message, he 'only' offers signifiers in all their beauty. From the first moment the spectator is confronted with the question: what does this mean? What does he want to show us?

This theatre experience is, from the very start, a confrontation with our desire, for example our desire to understand, to know. The performance shows us a chain of images, a chain of signifiers which are very difficult to frame in a signification process. By doing that it faces us with how we handle the stream of images and words in our daily life. We reduce these to manageable words we understand. We put everything in well-known frames of signification and repress the lack in the signification process. We do repress the fact that there is always something missing or something going wrong in our speech. This lack gives us frustration, discomfort. It smashes us against our border, our lack that constitutes us as a subject. Castellucci

shows us that we are nothing more than a representation, an image, a signifier that is shattered and that searches its place in the world, in a story which turns around an abyss. Like an artist creating beauty, he is able to bring the spectator near the abyss which creates him. By doing this, he shows that there is only representation, there are only signifiers. Lacan would say, he shows us the world.

Castellucci gives the public so little that the spectator has only himself to fall back on. And here we can refer to the goal of theatre according to Freud and Lacan. The psychoanalytical theory gives us tools to talk about these performances which stage the basic structure of the subject and the world. It gives us the possibility to analyse the structure of performance free from any possible staged story.

Castellucci makes theatre in which the analysis of the structure of the subject is staged. By doing that he emphatically confronts the spectator with his insoluble desire. There is no story that veils the images he stages. There is no help for the public to understand or to grasp the event. His theatre does not offer a safety net that the spectator can have recourse to when he comes too close to the edge of the abyss of the Real. The only thing he offers them are signifiers which turn around the lack, the abyss that is funding us.

In Castellucci's postdramatic theatre the spectator seems to skip the first imaginary identification and has to go directly to the second one where the subject has to identify himself with the staged signifiers that he is related to. He is represented in the world as a signifier, as a part of the Symbolic order. Being represented as a signifier structures his being.

Castellucci's theatre shows us what we are: castrated subjects, marked by a desire that can not be satisfied. He shows that in a stripped way. The only veil he uses is an aesthetic one. As a spectator we can not hide behind a ethical or political message, there is only the beauty of the images that we can look at and that is sometimes unbearable and dazzling.

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<sup>1</sup> Lehman Hans-Thies, *Postdramatic Theatre*, transl. and intr. Karen Jürs-Munby, (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 17-18.

<sup>2</sup> “Ce que Hamlet fait représenter sur la scène, c’est donc, en fin de compte, lui-même, accomplissant le crime dont il s’agit. » Lacan Jacques, *Le séminaire livre X : L’Angoisse*, (Paris : Seuil, 2004), 46.